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Letter to the editor
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The casual reader of the Policy Forum article in the October 23, 2009, issue of Science, Fixing a Critical Climate Accounting Error, by Searchinger et. al., could easily come away with the impression that the U.S. biomass power industry is a major source of greenhouse-gas emissions. However, buried in the Forum is an argument in favor of exempting waste and residue forms of biomass, an exemption that would cover the entire U.S. biomass-power industry!

The Forum presents a muddled perspective on the science behind biomass energy and greenhouse gases. It fails to even mention the fact that on the most fundamental level energy production from biomass is carbon neutral because the carbon in biomass is already part of the atmospheric carbon cycle, unlike the carbon in fossil fuels that is permanently sequestered unless it is used for energy production.

The Forum focuses instead on the potential for biomass-energy use to cause land-use changes that can lead to releases of stored carbon. Land-use impacts are associated only with the use of biomass crops. It is crucially important to make clear that the concerns cited in the Forum are limited to the use of energy crops, and do not pertain to waste and residue forms of biomass.

The Forum also mischaracterizes the economics of energy production from biomass, suggesting that a finding of carbon neutrality would lead to widespread use of energy crops. In fact, the production of electricity from biomass is a financially-marginal enterprise at best. Despite all of the RPS initiatives around the country and the availability of stimulus funding, very few new biomass projects are being developed, and many existing operations are cutting back or shutting down.

The bottom line is this: Waste and residue forms of biomass deserve both a categorical exemption from the cap-and-trade program, and the opportunity to earn offsets based on quantifiable and verifiable reductions in emissions of biogenic greenhouse gases. In the case of the biomass power industry, the "critical climate accounting error" cited in the Forum is neither critical, nor an error.



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